

Business Standard

AAP against the wall

What the challenger brand should do to stay relevant

Ritwik Sharma May 14, 2017 Last Updated at 23:09 IST



In its political career of just over four years, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has hit

AAP denies allegations against it have dented its popular appeal, but fears a serious attempt to malign its brand image. Photo: Reuters

spectacular highs and lows, projected a squeaky clean image despite intermittent rifts within, and never been away from media glare thanks to its brand of attention-grabbing politics. While much of it may have acted as reinforcements so far, recent events have raised serious question marks over the shelf life of its political branding.

The party is bullish about maintaining its style, akin to pressure group tactics. AAP spokesperson Ashutosh says any exercise to reposition the party is always on, not as a conscious choice but in response to changes in the political dispensation ruling at the Centre. He argues that recent events have not dented the party, but there is a serious attempt to malign its brand image of an anti-corruption crusader and honest, alternative politics. “The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other political parties are making an attempt to taint us, to show that we are like them and no different. If we are like them, then we lose our uniqueness and our selling point,” he says.

He adds that in the run-up to the civic polls allegations were made against the AAP which were proven to be false. For instance, recently in court the counsel of the lieutenant-governor — who had ordered recovery of

Rs 97 crore allegedly spent by the party on government ads in violation of guidelines — said it was merely an advisory.

Ankit Lal, head of the AAP's IT cell, says they have to realign communication strategies for every situation. "There are too many fake stories going around us at this point. So the first target is to deflate rumours," he says, giving an example of how the IT cell got Punjab MLA Sukhpal Singh Khaira to do a Facebook Live post to quell rumours of links with the BJP. With Kejriwal's credibility under question, trending social media campaigns with a hashtag like "IBribedKejriwal", where people shared their donation certificates, generated much positivity, claims Lal. Thirdly, the IT cell is trying to showcase government work with greater focus on unsung ministries such as food and civil supplies. Lastly, by attempting to prove in the Assembly itself that electronic voting machines can be tampered with, the AAP is aiming to further strengthen its anti-establishment stance.

Former AAP leader Yogendra Yadav fears the muddying of the party's brand has implications for not just Kejriwal but everyone else, including him, as "it may lead to a lack of trust in the alternative political sector". His argument is that if there are 10 noodle brands, one bad brand may be fine. But if the first is tainted, others too suffer.

"I think there was a large section of aspirational India with a newly discovered attachment for the country. This so-called middle class, which is upper class/upper caste and is an English-speaking elite, don't control votes but it controls perceptions and images. We euphemistically call them opinion makers. They desperately wanted to take pride in India but found very few reasons to feel pride in public life. And at that moment comes this movement which gave them hope. Kejriwal emerged as a person who embodied that hope," Yadav says.

That he carried an oppositional politics — which according to Yadav is forgiven by people only when a party is in opposition — into government partly led to the erosion of Kejriwal's charisma. "Secondly, the very visible and brazen defence of some of the indefensible things, and symbolically joining hands with Mamata Banerjee or sharing stage with Lalu Prasad diluted the distinctiveness of the brand. The latest allegations may take away the core of the brand."

Branding and marketing experts share similar views on the decline of brand AAP.

Samit Sinha, MD, Alchemist Consulting, says, "The AAP established a strong brand connect by promising people a participatory mode of transparent and corruption-free governance model. A lot of people bought into this vision. However, the biggest mistake the brand ended up making is that like all other parties it subordinated the idea of a party to a personality." It also has failed to convince voters on delivering good governance, after meeting its initial goal as a party focused on removing corruption.

Also, as a challenger brand it ought not to fight competition by acting like others but by finding a strong narrative of its own. "In the AAP's case, the ruling establishment hasn't allowed the party to do that. What is happening is that a party which was seen as a revolutionary idea is now seen as just another party," Sinha adds.

Siddharth Shekhar Singh, associate professor of marketing, Indian School of Business, agrees that the AAP can be compared to a pressure group which often tends to disintegrate once the core issue seems to be addressed. However, he feels that its anti-graft legacy still works in the AAP's favour.

How to counter threat to political brand

- AAP plans to 'deflate allegations' via social media, showcase govt work and strengthen its oppositional stance
- As a challenger brand, AAP ought not to fight competition by acting like others but by finding a strong narrative of its own
- The party has to carry out credible and visible changes in its organisational structure and conduct to show seriousness about rebuilding the party

“There is a huge vacuum in politics and with a party like the Congress in decline there is an opportunity for the AAP to occupy the high ground of corruption-free politics and transparent governance. It has to carry out credible and visible changes in its organisational structure and conduct to show seriousness about rebuilding the party. In order win back people’s trust, it has to stop hiding behind excuses and start taking ownership for its action and work,” he adds.

In an age of social media, influential people are very active in getting their share of news and information. But for a brand too much visibility can at times backfire, says Singh. So, AAP the brand’s actions have to mirror its words. To reconnect with people, it also needs to craft a credible communication message that resonates, as has been expertly done by the BJP to create the perception that it can deliver.

We employ emotions first and then look for facts and logic. And with the BJP riding a huge emotional wave, it goes to show that be it brands or parties people see what they believe, Sinha says.

“As with any industry or field, if you are entering politics you need to be clear about your strategy. You need to know your enemy, and play the game according to your strengths and not the leader’s. The brand AAP is caught in the web of complaining and blaming.”

Umashankar Venkatesh, professor, marketing, Great Lakes Institute of Management, identifies setting up of the Lokpal as a key part of the platform on which the AAP started its campaign, and therefore non-action on the front would not be appreciated by people who vocally supported it. “Also, the act of many well-known intellectuals leaving the party acrimoniously leads to questions on transparency and equity. While most other parties also are not transparent, it affects the AAP more since it is part of the core brand identity unlike others.”

Sinha alludes to examples of Pepsi versus Coke and Apple versus Microsoft to suggest how a challenger brand can dethrone a leader (the establishment) by changing the narrative. “All these mighty brands appeared invincible before the challenger brands arrived on the scene. The AAP can learn a lesson or two from such brands and save the situation for itself.”

With inputs from Sangeeta Tanwar